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NSC BRIEFING

D/FE, B/JK -  
21 December 1953

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POSSIBLE SITUATIONS ARISING FROM THE  
KOREAN PRISONER ISSUE ON 23 JANUARY*SM/C**anti*

I. The ~~Communist~~ holds that the 22,000 Communist prisoners must assume civilian status and hence be released on 23 January; the Communists assert that the prisoners must remain in neutral custody until the Korean political conference discusses their disposition.

II. India holds the deciding vote in the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission

A. Indian Chairman Thimayya is apparently planning to return the POW's to the original detaining sides if no other UNC-Communist agreement is reached before 23 January.

1. Thimayya's plan for withdrawing his guards on 22 January has been approved by Prime Minister Nehru, according to Swiss and Swedish NNC members.
2. Thimayya, who believes his authority ends on that date, plans to ask both sides to take back their POW's; if the Communists refuse, he intends to turn the pro-Communist POW's loose.
3. He will reportedly arrange "orderly opportunities" for the release of anti-Communist POW's and ask the UNC to receive them in a "phased" process.

B. There is a possibility, however, that India may delay the prisoner release.

1. Menon, Indian UN delegate, is trying to reconvene the General Assembly in early January to discuss the prisoner issue, and has denied responsibility for Thimayya's release plans.

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DOCUMENT NO.	NO CHANGE IN CLASS. <input type="checkbox"/>
DECLASSIFIED	CLASS. CHANGED TO: TS SC
NEXT REVIEW DATE: 272044	
AUTH: HS 702	REF ID: A672044
DATE: 12/21/53	

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2.

25X1X [REDACTED] on 18 December that  
New Delhi is still undecided whether  
the ~~UNC~~ or the NNRC should make the  
final decision on the POW's.

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3. A draft paper on the POW impasse which an Indian NNRC official is preparing to submit to the General Assembly has been termed "unfactual, red-colored, and catastrophic" by Swedish and Swiss NNRC members who refused even to discuss it because of its strong anti-UNC bias. Indian officials persist in believing the POW's were thoroughly indoctrinated before their turnover and that American "agents" have prevented repatriation. HAKSAK

4. India may also use the POW issue to show its displeasure at rumored American military aid to Pakistan.

5. Nehru, seeking to play it "down the line for neutralism," remains hesitant to take responsibility for freeing the POW's; he may announce his final position in a 23 December policy speech to Parliament.

III. The following situations are likely to prevail if the POW's are released on 22 January:

A. The Communists are unlikely to resort to armed action because:

1. The entry of troops into the neutral zone would violate the truce agreement and risk renewal of the war.
2. They probably do not actually want the prisoners back.
3. They probably desire disposal of the POW issue prior to the conference to avoid another psychological defeat.
4. The situation presents them with an opportunity to accuse the US of violating the truce, and to continue its propaganda on "forcible retention."

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B. Communist propaganda threats that a POW release will lead to renewed fighting seem unlikely since the Communists give no indication of preparing for this course of action.

1. Propaganda output would probably aim a world-wide blast at the US and Rhee, and possibly at "Indian terrorism."
2. ~~Since a release would represent a defeat for the Communists, they might seek to divert attention by creating a spectacular event somewhere else in the world.~~

C. No action by President Rhee is contemplated, except possibly to demand a prompt turnover of the POW's by the UNC.

1. He told a press conference on 16 December that the POW's will be set free "automatically" on 22 January.
2. He may demand a prompt departure of Indian troops and may oppose their contemplated removal by land through South Korean territory.
3. Having obtained the prisoners' release, however, one important deterrent to taking unilateral military action is removed.

D. Since the prisoners recognize their dependence on the UNC and South Korea for initial support, they will probably carry out an orderly transfer to UNC custody at some point along the southern boundary.

1. There is some possibility of an attack by the 22,000 anti-Communist POW's upon the 350 pro-Communist POW's, or of a pro-Communist POW refusal to leave the compounds which, they may believe, violates the truce.
2. There is some possibility of disorder following the release due to the possible presence of some POW's desiring repatriation to the north among the anti-Communist group. Thimayya estimates these number 1,500-2,000.

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IV. The following situations are likely to prevail if the POW's are not released on 22 January:

A. Since the Communists favor retention of the POW's beyond the time limit, no action is contemplated.

1. It is doubtful if the Communists would even oppose Rhee's use of force against Indian troops; responsibility to repel any such move rests with the UNC.

2. The Communists have, however, demanded extension of the explanations period, and may have suddenly resumed explanations on 21 December to buttress this demand.

B. Rhee may order a mass breakout if prolonged detention is indicated and he might use the retention as an excuse to launch a unilateral attack.

1. He is already threatening action against Indian custodial forces, but may find this difficult since South Korean forces near the area are attached to the US 1st Marine Division.

2. He will consider an indefinite POW detention a truce violation, automatically justifying renewed fighting.

3. The January release date coincides quite closely with the end of the period of his pledge not to obstruct the armistice. He continues to assert that he will order a march northward after that time. Lately, he has been emphasizing the "right" rather than the "intention" to attack.

4. While he has made few military preparations, other than establishing a Joint Chiefs of Staff and unifying his troops into a single field army, and while he has no illusions about US determination not to resume fighting, he is amply capable of taking action if he thinks he can involve the US.

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5. His most likely course would be to create front-line incidents in hopes of provoking the Communists to attack first.
6. Above all, he is unpredictable, highly emotional in believing that a suicide attack is preferable to "slow strangulation," and as Ambassador Briggs says, "unhesitant about polluting the stream of US-South Korean relations" whenever he imagines it is to his immediate benefit. *FN* [REDACTED] VIEWS: 25X1A

- a. He largely destroyed Dean's ability to negotiate with the Communists by repudiating three days later a cabinet decision to approve neutral participation in the political conference.
- b. He showed utter contempt for US leadership when he unilaterally released 27,000 prisoners last June.

7. Despite his unquestioned determination to fight Communism, [REDACTED] found him and the entire South Korean government leadership to be "an uncertain, stubborn, suspicious, unimaginative group whom it is exceptionally difficult to help." 25X1X

- C. The anti-Communist POW's expect to be released according to the UN time-table and prolonged detention will almost certainly cause rioting and attacks on the Indian troops.

1. Without a prospect of release, Seoul seems certain to order a mass breakout and have probably made advance preparations for absorbing the POW's into the South Korean community.
2. Prisoners on both sides who are considered unreliable may be killed; some pro-Communists among the unrepatriated group may attempt to join guerrilla forces in South Korea, or operate as agents.

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